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ABSTRACT

Data were gathered from 18 superintendents, 15 curriculum directors, 16 principals, 92 department heads, and 120 high school teachers in the state of Delaware regarding their perceptions of high school principals' leadership role in the areas of curriculum development and instructional improvement. (Author/MLF)

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The Role of the High School Principal in Curriculum Development and the Improvement of Instruction

D. Hugh Ferguson
Temple University, 1975

Dissertation (Ed.D.)

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Among the responsibilities of the high school principal is a mandate for leadership in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction. A review of research indicates a notable gap in empirical studies regarding the specific roles of the high school principal as a curriculum developer and as an improver of instruction, a finding which motivated the current investigation. This study sought to ascertain and analyze perceptions held by superintendents, curriculum directors, high school principals, department heads, and teachers of the role performances of the high school principal in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction.

In reviewing the literature, it became apparent that research indicated somewhat dichotomous roles of the principal, vacillating between the role of instructional leader on the one hand and executive manager on the other. While the literature indicates support for the former role much research tends to support the latter. A greater number of significant studies center around the role of the elementary principal than the secondary principal and two studies of the director of curriculum and instruction have a direct

EA 008 988

bearing on the current investigation. A study by Mickelson, Appel and Prusso[1] expressed a need for empirical studies of the role of the principal, while an investigation of the chief supervisory-curriculum official by Helen R. Burchell served as a model for the current investigation because of its design of specific tasks set into a format of pre-determined roles.[2]

Among studies of the role of the elementary principal, Gross and Herriott conducted the most significant, a national survey of nearly 4,000 participants, including 501 principals.[3] The focus of the study was the determinants and effects of what the investigators termed Executive Professional Leadership. This study concluded by stating that the findings offered much empirical support for a leadership conception of the principal's role, and "undermined a major argument for abandoning it."[4]

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[1]John M. Mickelson, Marilyn B. Appel and Kenneth G. Prusso, "An Analysis of the Functions of the Director of Curriculum and Instruction (unpublished paper, Temple University, 1968), entire manuscript.

[2]Helen R. Burchell, "Consensus and Divergence of Ascriptions Related to Role Performance of the Chief Supervisory-Curriculum Officials in Three Selected School Systems" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1965), entire microfilm manuscript.

[3]Neal Gross and Robert E. Herriott, Staff Leadership in Public Schools (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1965), 250 pp.

[4]Ibid., p. 151.

At the secondary level, studies are less specific and more concerned with overall functions of the secondary principal. The Senior High School Principalship, a survey of 16,000 high school principals, involved only a summary of factual data and principals' viewpoints on critical issues, neglecting specific statements of what high school principals actually do.[5] Other studies are concerned with general effectiveness without specific tasks or roles and are not numerically extensive in terms of number of respondents.[6]

The model for the current investigation, a survey study of the chief supervisory-curriculum officer in three school districts, consisted of a series of performance tasks assigned to roles generally ascribed to the position, surveying perceptions of role performances by superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction, elementary and secondary principals and teachers. As a result of reviewing this study by Burchell, it was determined that a similar investigation of the role performances of the high school principal was both feasible and desirable.

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[5]John K. Hemphill, James M. Richards, and Richard E. Peterson, Report of the Senior High School Principalship, National Association of Secondary School Principals, Vol. 1 (1965), entire report.

[6]Complete bibliography of literature and research is listed at the conclusion of this report.

THE PROBLEM AND THE POPULATION

The current investigation sought to ascertain and analyze perceptions held by superintendents, curriculum directors, high school principals, department heads and teachers of the role performances of the high school principal in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction.

Answers were sought to the following questions:

1. How do high school principals perceive their roles in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction?
2. What are the roles of the high school principal in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction as perceived by superintendents, curriculum directors, department heads, and high school teachers?
3. Is there agreement of perceptions among superintendents, curriculum directors, department heads and teachers concerning the role of the principal in curriculum development and the improvement of instruction?
4. What is the relationship between perceptions of the high school principal's role performances as held by superintendents, curriculum directors, principals, department heads, and teachers, and educational background, years of experience in their current positions, and size of school population?

The population for this investigation was comprised of superintendents, directors of curriculum, high school principals, department heads and teachers in 18 public school districts in the State of Delaware. Criteria for participation in the study included: (1) Participants must have served at least one academic year with the high school

principal; (2) All vocational high schools were excluded; (3) Assistant principals and associate principals were excluded from the study. Tasks of the principal were described as either personally performed or personally originated by the principal.

For purposes of this investigation, pertinent definitions are as follows:

1. Role: the dynamic aspects of a position, that is, those acts which collectively put the rights and duties of a status position into effect.[7]

2. Function: a group of related actions which in turn relate to the large action consistent with the position.[8] "Function is comprehensively applicable to the proper or characteristic action of the person."[9] The term role is synonymous with function.

3. Task: the specific act, which combined with other specific acts, constitutes the behavior of the principal in fulfillment of role.[10]

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[7]Neal Gross, Ward S. Mason and Alexander McEachern, Explorations in Role Analysis (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958), p. 321.

[8]Mickelson, Appel and Prusso, "Functions of the DCI," p. 3.

[9]Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Seventh Edition.

[10]Burchell, "Convergence and Divergence of Ascriptions," p. 1.

4. Curriculum Development: those elements of the educational program dealing with:

   (a) statements of aims and objectives
   (b) selection and organization of content
   (c) evaluation of outcomes.[11]

5. Improvement of instruction: those elements of the educational program dealing with:

   (a) strategies of teaching
   (b) training and evaluating teachers[12]

6. Curriculum implementation: those aspects of curriculum development which have been formulated by the principal and his staff.

7. Instructional climate: interpersonal relationships between the principal, staff and students which facilitate teaching and learning.

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[11] Hilda Taba, Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962) p. 10.

[12] Derived from J. Galen Saylor and William M. Alexander, Curriculum Planning for Modern Schools (New York: Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966), pp. 272-273.

PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

In pursuing the investigation, the procedural steps included selection of population, description of roles, selection of performance tasks, validation of questionnaire items, a pilot study to determine reliability and to clarify language, and statistical treatment of data.

There were three factors to be considered in the final selection of school districts and participating high schools: stability of staff, stability of officers, and programs offered to students. It was determined that only those school personnel who had served at least one year with the current high school principal and only high school principals who had served at least one year in their current positions were eligible to participate, that all vocational high schools were excluded, and that assistant principals and associate principals were excluded. In addition to participants occupying leadership positions, ten teachers from each high school were selected at random, random sampling being achieved by selecting the teachers appearing at each 10 per cent mark of an alphabetical listing of all high school faculty members in each participating school. All participants were checked for qualifications according to the criteria, the final group of respondents in the study including 18 superintendents, 15 directors of curriculum and instruction, 16 high school principals, 92 department heads and 120 high school teachers.

Selection of task items and description of roles were determined through a combined process of pre-testing and piloting of the survey instrument. In selecting task items

for the survey questionnaire, the essential question was to be, "As you perceive the situation, does the high school principal perform these acts?" Responses to each item were to be YES, NO, or UNCERTAIN.

The task items were selected from a total list of 83 statements drawn from the literature of supervision, administration and curriculum fields. A total of 50 task items comprised the final questionnaire.

Description of roles was achieved through a review of supervision, curriculum, and administration texts, leading periodicals in the field, advice of the sponsoring committee, and the investigator's personal experience as a high school vice principal and a middle school principal. In addition, a group of 13 educators were asked to place each item as written under a designated role of the high school principal. After three such pre-tests and rewriting of items, all tasks except two were agreed upon at a 70 per cent level, grouped under the following roles:

Role 1: provides leadership in curriculum development.

Role 2: provides leadership in curriculum implementation.

Role 3: provides leadership in organizing for improvement of instruction.

Role 4: provides leadership in development of a positive instructional climate.

The remaining two tasks were agreed upon at a 60 per cent level. Thus, the actual survey questionnaire consisted of 50 tasks grouped into the previously listed roles of the high school principal in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction.

A pilot study was undertaken employing 24 teachers, 9 department chairmen, 3 principals, 1 director of curriculum and instruction and 1 superintendent. Each participant was not a part of the actual investigation, and each was asked to respond to the survey questionnaire as well as to a personal data sheet eliciting information regarding educational background, educational experience, qualifications for making judgments of the curriculum program, and the perceived effect of the negotiated contract upon the principal's role performance. To verify the validity and clarity of the tasks as written, each participant in the pilot was to reply by YES, NO, UNCERTAIN (do not know), or UNCERTAIN (do not understand the task as written). Comments were solicited at the conclusion of the survey questionnaire and also at the bottom of the instructional page preceding the pilot questionnaire.

The pilot data were treated in the same manner as the actual investigation was to be treated. Data were treated by employing the median test and the extension of the median test as described by Siegel[13] to determine statistical significance of relationships between various groupings of data. To determine reliability of the questionnaire, the split-half technique as described by Downie and Heath[14]

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[13]Signey Siegel, Nonparametric Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 111-115; 179-184.

[14]N. M. Downie and R. W. Heath, Basic Statistical Methods (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 217-219; 84.

was employed, with a coefficient of correlation of .78 being obtained. Thus, reliability and validity of the survey instrument were determined.

The median test and the extension of the median test as mentioned above were selected for two reasons: (1) the data is non-parametric and this particular test is employed to determine relationships between independent populations by using chi square techniques on numbers of scores in each group above and below the common median of all groups being tested; (2) the median test had been employed in the Burchell study and would be useful in making comparisons between the findings of the two studies.

Having pre-tested and piloted the survey instrument and having determined the final arrangement of selected roles and tasks of the high school principal in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction, the investigator proceeded to conduct the study by utilizing superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction, high school principals, department heads, and high school teachers in the State of Delaware. Data from the study were then analyzed according to the pre-determined roles as described previously. Role perceptions related to item responses, experience of participants, educational background, size of school population and positions within the school districts were analyzed.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study involved perceptions of the role performances of the high school principals by various position occupants, as related to position, educational background, years of experience in the current position, size of student population in the high school, personally perceived qualifications for judging curriculum programs, and the perceived effect of negotiated teachers' contracts on the performance of the principal in the areas under investigation. Four roles were examined: leadership in curriculum development, leadership in curriculum implementation, leadership in organizing for improvement of instruction, and leadership in development of a positive instructional climate.

Regarding responses according to positions occupied by the respondents, a significant difference was found to exist between responses of superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction, and principals as a group and department heads and teachers as a group at the .001 level of significance. More than 66.7 per cent of superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction, and principals ascribed all four roles to the high school principal, while none of the roles were ascribed at a similar level by department heads and teachers. No significant differences were found to exist between responses of department heads and teachers.

In terms of strength of role ascriptions, all roles were ascribed to the high school principal by at least 55 per cent of all respondents. Role 4, "Provides leadership

in development of a positive instructional climate," however was ascribed by at least 65.7 per cent of all groups. This difference in responses was found to be significant at the .05 level. Thus, it would appear that while administrative personnel perceive the role performances of high school principals to be significantly higher than department heads and teachers, performances in areas of curriculum development, curriculum implementation, and organization for improvement of instruction were uniform in strength. The principal's performance in providing leadership in development of a positive instructional climate was perceived to be significantly stronger, indicating a relationship with other studies on general effectiveness of the principal. Beyond this conclusion, the data do not warrant further cause-effect generalizations.

PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIFIC TASKS

In examining responses to specific tasks of the high school principal, it was found that from a total of 50 items, no task was agreed upon by all participants as being performed by the principal, 12 tasks were ascribed at the 66.7 per cent level, and one task was rejected by more than 60 per cent of all groups of respondents. The three tasks agreed upon by the largest numbers in all positions were:

(a) Encourages teachers to engage in open and frank discussion of all issues with other staff members and himself.

(b) Provides leadership in drafting policies concerning student behavior.

(c) Plans student and teacher schedules to provide effective instructional practices.

The two tasks rejected by the largest per cent of respondents in all groups were:

(a) Provides consultants for curriculum changes.

(b) Arranges demonstrations which utilize specific instructional tactics. (This was the only task with a 40 per cent or less response by all groups).

All responses to the remaining task items were distributed widely among position occupants.

MISCELLANEOUS FINDINGS

No significant relationships were found to exist between teachers and department heads as a group when compared by master's degrees and bachelor's degrees, nor was the size of school population found to be significant in percentages of responses. In addition, no high school principals were found to have elicited a significant number of NO responses to role performances from respondents within their school buildings or within their school districts.

On the other hand, experience as a teacher was found to be a statistically significant factor in that teachers with 10 years or more experience were found to respond YES in significantly higher numbers. Among teachers as a group, a significantly greater percentage of YES responses was found to exist within the group who judged themselves qualified to judge a total curriculum program.

Among perceptions of the role performances of individual principals, only one school principal was found to have elicited a statistically significant number of YES responses from all groups within his building or within his district. Among department heads and teachers grouped together, three high school principals were found to have received statistically significant numbers of YES responses. There were no principals who elicited a significantly different number of NO responses. The data gathered to not permit speculation as to why these differences were perceived to exist.

Finally, only one school district group perceived the negotiated contract to have exerted an effect on the principal's performance in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction.

CONCLUSIONS

It was assumed for purposes of this study that perceptions of the scope of the principal's role in the four areas represented by the basic questions were of primary importance. Within the limitations of the study the following conclusions appear to be justified:

1. How do high school principals perceive their roles in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction?

    a. Principals perceived themselves to be performing actively in all four roles as curriculum developers and as improvers of instruction, as indicated by their YES responses at nearly an 80 per cent level.

    b. The overall pattern of responses leads to the conclusion that the four roles investigated in this study are being performed, however diversely perceived, by the majority of high school principals in the State of Delaware.

2. What are the roles of the high school principal in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction as perceived by superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction, department heads and high school teachers?

    a. All groups of respondents perceived the high school principal to be performing all roles, as indicated by the YES responses from all groups.

    b. The primary role of the high school principal appeared to be that of providing leadership in developing a positive instructional climate.

active in curriculum development and the improvement of instruction than the director of curriculum and instruction. Such a conclusion must be drawn with caution, however, because the responsibilities of the two positions are not identical, the former being concerned with building responsibilities and the latter with district-wide concerns.

3. Is there agreement of perceptions among superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction, department heads, and teachers concerning the role of the principal in curriculum development and the improvement of instruction?

    a. Superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction and principals perceived the roles of the high school principal similarly.

    b. Department heads and teachers perceived the roles of the high school principal similarly.

    c. The two groups, a and b above, perceived the roles of the high school principal differently.

    d. Three high school principals were apparently performing the four roles more actively than all other principals in the study, as indicated by YES responses in all roles.

4. What is the relationship between perceptions of the high school principal's role performances as held by superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction,

principals, department heads and teachers, and educational background, years of experience in their current positions, and size of school population?

a. Neither educational background nor size of school population appeared to have an effect on perceptions of role performances of the high school principal.

b. Years of experience did indeed appear to influence responses in the perceptions of department heads and teachers of the role performances by the principal.

5. An additional factor was later added to the original study questions: What effect does the negotiated teachers' contract have on the principal's behavior in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction?

The negotiated teachers' contracts are not as yet important factors in the principal's behavior in the field of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction at this time in the State of Delaware. The diversity of responses, however, indicates that this question may become an important concern for the near future.

COMPARISON OF FINDINGS WITH THE BURCHELL STUDY

As mentioned previously, the present investigation of the high school principal was designed from a previous study of the director of curriculum and instruction by Helen R. Burchell. In her study, role perceptions of the director of curriculum and instruction by occupants of various positions in three school systems in New Jersey were surveyed, arriving at two major conclusions: (1) that significant relationships between perceptions of superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction, and principals as a group and those of teachers as a group were found to exist; (2) that extensive ambiguity was found to exist among teachers regarding perceptions of role performance of the chief supervisory-curriculum official.

The current study sought to provide a similar data base concerning the role of the high school principal. In a comparison of findings, the two studies were similar in overall conclusions. As in the Burchell study, perceptions by superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction and principals converged in a significantly different proportion than teachers as a group. As in the Burchell study, teachers tended to give a higher percentage of UNCERTAIN responses than other groups, indicating a greater degree of ambiguity of perceived role performances. It can, however, be concluded that the principal is perceived to be substantially more active in performance of the selected roles in curriculum development and improvement of instruction than the director of curriculum and instruction; that is, teachers in the Burchell study responded YES at a 43

per cent level, while the current study resulted in a 59 per cent level of YES responses. It must be noted that neither roles nor task items were identical in the two studies, so that some latitude must be given to interpretations of the foregoing findings. While the director of curriculum and instruction is charged with district-wide responsibilities, the principal is concerned with building tasks. Thus, the only proper conclusion based on the data presented indicates that the building principal is a primary factor in curriculum development and instructional improvement. Based on responses of principals in the two studies, it is also possible to conclude that the principalship is a more autonomous position that might be indicated on a line-staff organizational chart.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Findings of this investigation indicate the following areas of possible research:

Each of the four roles investigated in the present study might well be studied separately, employing a smaller population and utilizing depth techniques such as interviews and daily log narratives of role performances. Such an investigation might begin to approach the question of quality of curriculum development and improvement of instruction as provided by the principal's leadership.

In broadening the impact of research on the role performance of the high school principal, studies of specific tasks applied to managerial roles of the high school principal in administrative services might be undertaken.

To continue role clarification, it would appear useful to investigate perceptions of role performances of department chairmen and relationships between role performances of department chairmen and perceptions of the principal's role performance.

In the State of Delaware, only one school district professional population perceived the negotiated contract as having an effect on the role performance of the principal. However, a wide variety of responses were found to exist to this question, thus indicating that further research in this area would serve usefully to define the high school principal's role in the coming decade.

Finally, in defining roles for curriculum development and the improvement of instruction in public schools, it would appear that a study similar to the current investigation might be conducted regarding the role perceptions of the performance of the instructional supervisor. In this way, a comprehensive view of the roles of the director of curriculum and instruction, the high school principal and the instructional supervisor would be available for analysis and for more clearly defined areas of service and/or responsibility.

There is one broader aspect of the effects of role performance which needs considerable research. It is recommended that further study be conducted as to whether widespread diversity of perceptions of role performances is truly a detrimental factor on the production of a school system as measured by various outcomes such as teacher morale, teacher effectiveness, student productivity, student

achievement or other similar outcomes. Does congruence of perceptions mean satisfaction, dissatisfaction, or neither with the leadership of a school official? And does familiarity with the roles of a leadership position occupant have any effect upon the performances of teachers and students? Conclusions and implications of these findings regarding each of the previously mentioned questions would be useful in promoting more effective curriculum development and greater improvement of instruction.

Further recommendations include application of the findings of this study in the following manner#:

1. Principals might well use this survey instrument effectively with their own staffs to examine perceived performances in the areas of curriculum development and the improvement of instruction.

2. Principals, in order to be perceived as effective leaders in curriculum development and the improvement of instruction, must involve faculty members in curriculum development. Limited knowledge of a program by staff members appears to produce a limited number of YES responses to perceptions of the principal's performance in the four identified roles.